The Culture of Beauty: I

Elective Surgery, Cosmetics, & Health

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Introduction

As women, we often forget that we are *simply* beautiful without making any adjustments to our faces and bodies. We also forget that there are other types of beauty aside from physical beauty.

Though these are simple truths, we often live our lives constantly trying to *enhance* our bodies in some shape or form to be *more* beautiful and to *appear* more attractive to ourselves and others.

One day, I decided to complete a one-year time span of not utilizing any makeup products. This experience helped me to love and accept my natural self, *more* than I did before I commenced the journey; my self-esteem and self-confidence inevitably benefitted and soared from completing this journey. I have never heavily and consistently utilized makeup, but I still often used mascara and eyeliner to give me that "pop". This

journey of not using makeup enlightened me of how dependent a woman can become on even the simplest makeup tools and techniques to enhance her appearance.

The culture of beauty thrives on others' consistent dependence on different "beauty enhancing" techniques such as cosmetics, plastic surgery, and fad diets; my goal is to avoid dependence on beauty enhancing techniques to prevent myself from being an active participant in this artificial culture.

I spent a lot of my life as an unconscious participant in the culture of beauty. The consistent messages, advertisements, and media have affected me at many points in my life, and I often allowed (without even realizing it) these messages to internalize and influence me in ways that made me more self-conscious of my body. I know that if the media and the beauty industry

have affected me, then they have probably affected numerous others as well.

This book derived from a research paper I completed at the University of Georgia. I felt it necessary to expand on the paper because beauty culture affects ample amounts of people across the globe, which makes it a relevant topic. I do not write this book to criticize the beauty industry, but to speak candidly about it. I do not write this book to chastise people who take meticulous care of their appearance and utilize beauty techniques to enhance their appearance.

The purpose of this piece is to communicate how the culture of beauty can affect people in ways they may not even realize; furthermore, I write this book to help people understand the reasons *why* they choose to engage in beauty enhancing techniques. There is a difference between being brainwashed and influenced to believe your body is inadequate versus consciously, but still

willingly participating in beauty culture because you want to –knowing your natural body is *good enough*.

The Culture of Beauty Defined

You may ask, "What is the culture of beauty?" According to Caffrey (2015), “The culture of beauty refers to the prevalent standards of physical attractiveness as dictated by popular opinion.”

Within this culture, certain features are usually focused on such as symmetry, body weight, hair type, and skin tone. The media (e.g. music, magazines, film, entertainment, news, and advertisements) greatly influences what is considered beautiful and attractive.

If you take time to observe the media, you may notice that most women who are in news, film, entertainment, and broadcasting industries are often young (or look younger than their age) and are doused with makeup to *enhance* their physical appearance. Older women, and

presumably less attractive (according to Western societal ideals) women, are often shunned by society and are not often seen in the visible spotlight; *it is as if once a woman ceases to be a sexually consumable object or past a presumable reproductive age, she loses value*. Furthermore, there seems to be a negative correlation between a woman's value and the age of her body. You may also notice that there are considerably *more* men, who are older, that are actively involved in the industries I listed above in comparison to older women.

I believe the culture of beauty perpetuates gender oppression and gender inequality amongst women and men because it often conveys to society that women are *objects* to be enhanced — often for male consumption.

Women are continually *reduced* to their bodies; consequently, women are frequently *not* seen as full human beings. Moreover, through this timely

cultural norm, women have ended up unconsciously perpetuating and participating in their own objectification.

There are many forms of gender oppression that are directed at women, and the culture of beauty is only one of them. Many people have never considered the beauty industry to be an extension of the patriarchy or an example of oppression on women; however, if a person observes just how successful this billion-dollar beauty industry is, one may notice that *this industry thrives off the insecurities of women,* which is the fuel that feeds the culture of beauty. Understanding the culture of beauty and its effects on society will help mitigate the powerful influence it has on individuals across the globe.

Gender Oppression: There is not one exclusive definition for gender oppression. Gender oppression can represent unjust treatment or

control of a human being. It can also signify mental pressure or mental distress on someone.

Chapter 1: Plastic Surgery (Elective)

Is it wrong to get plastic surgery or is it empowering and demonstrative of the execution of one's owns agency over their body?

Is plastic surgery a breeding ground for insecure women?

"The face was once finite, a unique set of features and a mirror of the soul. You were born with it, lived with it, aged with it, and died with it. Now it's a movable feast; a playground and a battlefield where skin, flesh, and bone are manipulated [...]" (Espejo, 50).

When discussing the culture of beauty, the topic of plastic surgery is salient due to the continuously soaring rates of women who obtain plastic surgery today. "Women account for more than nine-tenths of all cosmetic procedures"

(Espejo, 128). This statistic shows how there is a disproportionate number of women obtaining plastic surgery in comparison to men. This is probably because many women often feel *more* pressure to be physically attractive in comparison to men. Furthermore, the age of people who obtain any form of plastic surgery has been drastically decreasing; there are many females, still in their teenage years, who are obtaining elective surgery to enhance their appearance. Women are not only getting boob jobs and face lifts, but also many sorts of injections all over their bodies.

There are many reasons people get cosmetic surgery. “Plastic surgeons commonly say that [people] today choose surgery [...] –to empower, better, and preserve themselves” (Espejo, 130), but there are countless other reasons that essentially boil down to the need and desire for external validation from others and the sustainment of youth. Having a “good body” and

being attractive (according to societal standards), whether the body is fake or real, can win a person attention, social value, pseudo-confidence, and advantages (e.g. more job opportunities, kindness, admiration, popularity, etc.) in comparison to a person that looks less attractive.

In many cases, the obtainment of *elective* plastic surgery demonstrates that many people have learned to not appreciate their natural *untouched* bodies.

Boobs: The Obsession is Real

A woman's breasts have been noted as one of the most interesting body parts she possesses. Often, a woman will be judged *and* criticized based on the size and shape of her breasts. Everyone (including species) has breasts. So, what has perpetuated this “boob frenzy”? What do *you* think has perpetuated it? It seems that since society has gotten caught up with this *female reproductive organ*, women have also got caught

up into the frenzy. Countless women have forgotten that all breast sizes are beautiful and unique. Large breasts, medium breasts, small breasts, uneven breasts, and flat breasts, are all amazingly beautiful and unique, but many of us have still become consumed and self-conscious about our breasts. *But why? Where did we learn to feel insecure about our breasts?* Many women feel their breasts are: 1. Not big enough and 2. Do not have the right proportions (uneven).

Some women who get surgery base their decision upon what they believe others desire to see and find attractive*;* hence, breast augmentations are one of the most frequently executed procedures.

Side note: If you have never seen a breast augmentation performed, take the time to watch a documentary or a procedure. Observe and analyze the procedure and see how it makes you feel; I know I felt enlightened after I watched a breast augmentation being executed.

Risks

Obtaining a breast augmentation has been a consistent trend amongst the female community. The issue does not lie in obtaining the breast augmentation though; the issue lies in the reasoning behind the breast augmentation. Why do many women put themselves at risk to enhance their physical appearance? Even though there are many successful breast surgeries, there are often many cases where things do not go as planned. *Is putting yourself at risk for a fleeting physical characteristic really worth it?* For some it is, and for others, not so much.

Essentially plastic surgery is the equivalent to *unnecessary* pain that you pay in exchange for what you or others define as more attractive. "[...] a woman is prepared to suffer considerable pain to be remolded to male specifications [...]" (Espejo, 56). The fact that women are willing to put themselves at physical risk for elective

procedures demonstrates how powerful the culture of beauty affects women. Why and how are so many women willing to voluntarily put themselves at risk to enhance their physical appearance? Yes, many cosmetic and plastic surgery procedures are often low risk, *but* there is always a chance for complications and *death;* of course, this does not occur in most cases but *can and does* happen (e.g. Kanye West's mother died from complications of her plastic surgery).

When women consistently consume media messages, without any critical awareness, they intake these messages and become infected by the culture of beauty. Overtime, the consumption of media messages, specifically ones focused on the body or that utilize the body, can decrease the self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-appreciation of an individual; this can potentially occur by simply seeing presumably perfect bodies repeatedly, which inevitably takes a

negative toll on a person's psyche about their own body —*if they allow it*.

From here on, understand and be aware of why you make the choices you do about your body. If you want to obtain plastic surgery or already have, I encourage you to understand the motive behind the desire. Is it because you feel like you are *missing* something, are unattractive, are inadequate without the surgery, or because you want a change along with the opportunity to execute your autonomy? Always seek the motives behind your actions and observe (don't judge) them. But before anyone decides to get any form of cosmetic surgery, I recommend that they work on loving themselves so much that they can consciously question (with little bias) if obtaining the surgery is truly worth it; they should ensure that their mind is full of clarity and not with self-doubt, nor thoughts generating from feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Furthermore, a person should take into

consideration how the consistent intake of various forms of media can insidiously influence their decisions.

Chapter 2: The Beauty Industry

It seems that many women forget just how beautiful their faces are without makeup. In this section on cosmetics, I am specifically referring to the use of makeup on a *woman's face*.

Annalisa Barbieri argues that "cosmetics are not just ways to improve one's looks but are essential to a woman's self-esteem" (Espejo, 102).

However, Carlin Flora, argues that "people are more beautiful than they think they are, and stopping the obsession about your looks [...] can make you look better by improving your confidence" (Espejo, 106). Some people believe that consistently utilizing makeup is not a negative action or habit. Others believe consistently utilizing makeup is an institution of bondage, oppression, and devaluation of the natural body. I do take into consideration that

many individuals use makeup as art, for fun, and some only use makeup on an occasional basis. However, I am focusing on individuals who are dependent on makeup, never leave the house without make-up, and individuals who feel incomplete and less confident without makeup on their faces. If a woman feels that she *must* wear makeup, she is conveying to the world that she does not feel comfortable with her natural appearance, and she does not accept her natural appearance for what it is. Women who become dependent on makeup are essentially in bondage because they feel they cannot go without it.

Furthermore, *quality* makeup is not the cheapest thing to buy; in the long run, the costs of makeup add up overtime, and this could potentially financially hinder some women or cost them thousands of unnecessary spent dollars.

I believe the beauty industry is a highly profitable industry; this industry monetizes individuals'

feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, low self-esteem, and low self-confidence. In my opinion, people who are dependent on makeup are the victims and targets of the beauty industry, because they constantly invest into this billion-dollar industry without receiving anything truly valuable in return except for more objectification of their bodies and a *false sense of self*.

"A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage" (Hooks, 1).

Many people that habitually use makeup, do not realize how they have been perniciously influenced into this habit. The mere fact that the cosmetic industry directs most of its advertisements and products at women conveys how much more valued a woman's appearance is in comparison to a man's appearance; this also

shows which *gender* or sex is predominantly targeted in this industry.

The pressure to enhance the female body perpetuates the idea that a woman is close to nothing more than her body, and that her body defines her value; it also can inhibit the development of a woman's intellect and unique set of skills that she possesses because she is so *focused on her appearance*. This value and focus that is placed on the female body displaces the value that *should* be placed on a woman's intellect or other valuable and intangible qualities (e.g. character, drive, talents, etc.)

“According to the objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997), Western societies sexually objectify women through media images, social interactions, and cultural messages about feminine beauty. This socializes women to self-objectify, that is, to view

themselves as social objects to be judged based on physical appearance" (Ford et al., 254).

Since many women are enculturated to self-objectify themselves, they essentially perpetuate their own dehumanization by treating and viewing themselves as the media and the general society do. Research makes the claim that the widespread utilization and *dependence* on makeup by individuals does not make sense, but it nevertheless improves how a woman feels about herself (somehow).

"It's nonsense on one level, of course, but the power of lipstick, and how it makes a woman feel, must never be trivialized. [...] to the enormous impact makeup and lipstick can have on a woman's psyche, there's more going on than just coloring in one's face (Espejo, 103).

John Gustafson is a skincare guru that donated excess and unused makeup to a women's refuge

center that housed women that had been beaten by their partners. “[...] apparently, it was a huge help psychologically for the women” (Espejo, 104).

So why does makeup help individuals psychologically? In one case, female soldiers were given a large amount of lipstick. Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett Gonin said, “At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to *give them back their humanity*” (Espejo 104-105). I think this statement is *profound*; I had to take time to digest this statement because it is extremely shocking. I could understand how the soldiers utilized lipstick to add more distinction to themselves due to homogenization, but why do many women, who have not been homogenized, act like their identity mainly comes through their appearance?

How could makeup, which often makes a woman look less like her natural self, give a woman back

her *humanity* and *identity*? I believe this statement conveyed how many women feel the need to *feel* and *believe* they are beautiful and attractive, which has often been taught to be the most important component of the female identity; in my opinion, this statement shows how women equate their value to their level of beauty. This relationship between beauty and self-value has been established through centuries of societal enculturation, and many women feel that they can elevate their value in society with the usage of makeup.

As Annalisa Barbieri argued, makeup can highly improve a woman's self-esteem and confidence (Espejo, 102), but self-esteem and self-confidence should not be solely based on appearance but should be more so based on internal characteristics. Women have developed a dependence so strong that many women believe it is necessary to use makeup to feel *better* about themselves. This situation hinders many women

from realizing and reaching their full potential as human beings; if women are so focused on their appearance, then they definitely will be distracted from making as many political, technological, social, and economical advances in society as they could if they were not as distracted by such trivial matters.

Media messages that promote unrealistic images of beauty have deceived many women. “The promotion of the [...] sexy ideal in our culture has created a situation where most girls and women don’t like their bodies” (Espejo, 185); Though society body shames both sexes with unrealistic ideals conveyed through the media, I make the claim that this situation is gender focused because more women are body shamed in comparison to men. According to Lamont (2015), “Body shame is a negative self-conscious emotional response to the perceived failure to meet a body ideal and the attribution of that failure to the core self.”

Challenge

As I stated in my introduction, I decided to not utilize any type of makeup for one year. I decided to do this because I wanted to discover for myself what it means to be a woman in our current society that does not utilize any makeup. I wanted to further develop my confidence independent of my appearance. If my skin broke out, I did not mask it. I simply let it heal on its own and let it show to the world. Falling in love with my natural appearance, without any help from cosmetics, was a big goal for me. Loving myself as I am, without trying to enhance my appearance in any way (aside from living a healthy and active lifestyle), is important to me.

Do you have to stop wearing makeup to develop your self-confidence? Of course not. However, I think choosing to not wear makeup for an extended period is a positively enriching and deep experience.

Not engaging in any cosmetics is going against societal norms. Society encourages women to use cosmetics to make themselves *look better*. Society and the media encourage women to always look their *best* even at the simplest of places. Society teaches many women that they *need* makeup and that they look plain or tired without it. By taking a break from makeup, you can navigate your feelings about yourself and most likely deal with some of the pressures that society has placed on you to be beautiful. Taking a break from cosmetics is the equivalent of an external detox. One of my goals is to ensure that I am never dependent on makeup. I want it to only be an accessory or a fun thing to do.

As women, we must learn to love our bodies as they are, and of course, we need to do our part to eat healthy and live an active lifestyle, but we must know that our bodies are perfection no matter what physical stage we are at. The ideas

that: women are not perfect, women need *a little extra help or a* physical boost*,* women should always look their *best, and* makeup is a necessary item to utilize, *are all erroneous*.

If you are a dependent makeup user, try going to simple places without makeup. Take an even bolder step and go to a big event without any makeup on. When I first began my journey of not utilizing makeup, I felt so *naked* and uncomfortable; I felt like my face was so bare and my look was not good enough. However, overtime I have learned to love and enjoy my natural face the way it is. Ironically, after a while I feel like my face became more attractive *to me,* after the long break I took from not utilizing makeup.

Why don't you try to take a break from makeup?

Even if you are going through a breakout, try not using makeup (it is better to not cover up

inflamed skin with makeup to give it time to breathe and heal). Take a week break or even 24-48 hours if you do not feel you can go for longer. By taking a break, you are officially taking a step back from participating in societal norms and becoming conscious of the culture of beauty. By taking this break, you can start to see how you truly feel about your appearance independent of makeup.

"She's so beautiful she doesn't even *need* to wear makeup": As women, let's put a stop to this statement. All women are beautiful. All women are beautiful without makeup. No woman *needs* to wear makeup. When we say things like this, we are telling others that women, who *aren't perceived* (according to societal standards) *as beautiful,* are *inadequate* without makeup on.

Chapter 3: Fitness & Health

I believe consistently investing in your personal health and fitness is the ideal way to transform and maximize your *natural body*.

We have all seen and heard hundreds upon hundreds of advertisements that claim to provide the perfect health, diet, and fitness solution for your body. However, there truly is not *one* perfect plan, solution, or diet. The health and fitness industry is a highly profitable industry because many people care about their appearance and believe in quick fixes, but the best solution to achieving optimal health and fitness, in addition to looking your best is: *consistency*.

Fitness

The fitness industry for women focuses more so on having a lean and toned body. Often, you do not hear much about how to become physically

stronger or how to build muscle mass. On the other hand, men are *usually* taught to focus on being physically strong and to build muscle mass. On the contrary, I believe that weightlifting is a great exercise for women to engage in despite it being a less popular choice amongst women in comparison to cardio.

Weightlifting helps your joints, muscles, and body to become stronger. Weightlifting also enhances your metabolism, which gives you the opportunity to eat more of the foods that you want to eat without them negatively affecting your physique. In addition to cardio, incorporating weightlifting will not get you "big", but provide you with more confidence, strength, and a defined physique. You will also be able to do more things on your own without the help of someone else because you will be physically stronger, which leads to you becoming a more independent person (which is always a plus).

Health

The most important step to living a healthy lifestyle is to eat a healthy and balanced diet; you can discover what this means for your body through trial and error because everyone has a unique body that responds differently to various types of foods. In my opinion, diets are a short-term solution. However, incorporating balanced eating habits is something that you can do for the rest of your life. You most likely are aware that new diets are *always* coming out; this is because there is no single diet that works for everyone.

I enjoy eating healthy, but I do not always eat perfectly healthy. I do my best to eat more healthy foods than less healthy foods, but I still give myself some leeway. A good rule of thumb you can live by is the 60/40 rule; overall, sixty percent of the time I eat healthy, and forty percent of the time I eat less healthy (or regular) foods. Moreover, you want to ensure you do not

feel deprived because deprivation leads to relapses and binging. It is best to execute a plan that is doable, interesting, easy (for the most part) and enjoyable; your plan should make you feel good within yourself (emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually).

There is no need to eliminate food groups (unless of course that is the best decision for your body and you have food sensitivities), because eliminating complete food groups is not a balanced habit. Avoiding carbs and fats because they seem bad for your physical body is not the best long-term approach either. Many women fear carbs and fats, but these nutrients are not bad for your body; there are simply certain carbs and fats which are less beneficial for your body, and there are simply *better* times in the day to eat these types of nutrients.

If you are currently *not* satisfied with your current weight, analyze what you are eating, and

determine what changes you can implement. There are often many things you can decrease in your diet to help you live healthier and feel better which include: fast food and sugar. It is consequential that whatever healthy changes you make are for *you*. If you live healthy for *you,* you will stay consistent. If you incorporate healthier changes to simply look better for others, then your results will most likely be short-lived. Love yourself enough to take care of yourself internally and externally because *you are worth it.*

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Thoughts

To let another person's way of dress encapsulate you into the act of judgement of their character or into establishing a level of respect for them is a fallacy. I love showing skin, and the way I dress is *never* an invitation.

Women that hate their bodies aren't naturally predisposed to; much of society and media teaches them to. Love yourself and love your body. Your self-worth is *never* equivalent to your appearance.

Women do not owe men beauty. The only person you owe anything to is yourself: to be the best you can be holistically. Don't let society nor fleeting physical attributes determine your worth. You are priceless.

Why do more women versus men, feel the need or have the desire to enhance their physical attractiveness by wearing consistent makeup, getting plastic surgery, dieting, etc.? Whoever told women that physical attractiveness is *that* important?

They believe their beauty declines because a *number* increases.

I wish women could walk around shirtless like men –without being over-sexualized or ostracized. I wish nakedness wasn't such a taboo idea. This inequality can insinuate that the female gender has been reduced to a sexual object more so than the male gender.

Women's faces are not incomplete, unattractive, tired-looking, or unprofessional without makeup. Women, you don't need to *try* to be beautiful...you already are –from the inside out.

I think *they* forget that we can like sex too.

I believe consistently investing in your personal health and fitness is the ideal way to transform and maximize your *natural body*.

Women Are Powerful **But Not Because Of Their Beauty**